

RESPONDING TO ABUSE



HELPS FOR
ECCLESIASTICAL
LEADERS

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Helps for Ecclesiastical Leaders

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HELP LINE

1-800-453-3860, ext. 1911

If you become aware of any child abuse involving Church members in the United States or Canada, or if you believe that a child may have been abused or is at risk of being abused, call the number listed above. See also the instructions on page 3.

Introduction

Abuse in any form is tragic and in opposition to the teachings of the Savior.

Abuse is the physical, emotional, sexual, or spiritual mistreatment of others. It may not only harm the body, but it can deeply affect the mind and spirit, destroying faith and causing confusion, doubt, mistrust, guilt, and fear.

Members who have been thus mistreated need kind, caring attention from inspired Church leaders, family members, and others who can help them overcome the destructive effects of abuse. The surest path to healing is through application of the teachings of Jesus Christ. Abused members should be encouraged to ask in faith for their Heavenly Father's help, nothing doubting (see James 1:6; Enos 1:15; Moroni 7:26; D&C 18:18). His love and the healing powers of the Atonement will ease their burdens and provide strength to overcome their adversities (see Matthew 11:29–30; 2 Corinthians 12:7–9; Mosiah 24:12–15; Jacob 4:10).

Priesthood leaders can also help those who committed the abuse to repent and to cease their abusive behavior.

This booklet is provided to help ecclesiastical leaders better assist all those affected by abuse to “come unto Christ, and be perfected in him” (Moroni 10:32).

My plea—and I wish I were more eloquent in voicing it—is a plea to save the children. Too many of them walk with pain and fear, in loneliness and despair. Children need sunlight. They need happiness. They need love and nurture. They need kindness and refreshment and affection.

GORDON B. HINCKLEY,
IN CONFERENCE REPORT, OCT.
1994, PP. 74–75; OR *ENSIGN*,
NOV. 1994, P. 54

Child Abuse

The scriptures declare that “children are an heritage of the Lord” (Psalm 127:3). The Savior said of those guilty of offenses toward children: “But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea” (Matthew 18:6; see also 18:1–5).

Emotional and physical abuse occur when an individual, in most cases an adult, threatens or causes mental, emotional, or physical harm to a child. In some instances, siblings are the offenders. The abuse may include such acts as threats of abandonment, cursing, demeaning comments, beating, withholding food or essential medical care, and other such deprivations.

The definition of *sexual abuse* varies depending on local law, but generally includes any lewd or sexual act between an adult (or significantly older youth) and a child, or the sexual exploitation of a child.

Church leaders and members should strive to help prevent child abuse and, when they become aware of abuse, to help children who have been injured.

The information in this section applies to teenagers as well as to young children.

Helping the Child

- *Provide spiritual counsel.* Children who receive timely and inspired guidance can be strengthened and may be less affected by the abuse. Assure the child that Heavenly

Father loves him or her, and that he has prepared a way for each of his children to overcome the adversities of life.

- *Respond quickly but carefully.* Immediate support for the child and other family members is important. The family crisis generally intensifies when the abuse becomes known outside the family. Reports of abuse can be divisive in families, wards, and communities.
- *Help the child understand that he or she is not to blame.* Most children subjected to abuse feel guilty even when they are innocent. Help the child understand that adults and others who abuse are responsible for their own behavior. Those who suffer from the evil acts of others are not guilty of sin.
- *Assure the child of your help and support.* Interviews with priesthood leaders should generally be supportive, not investigative beyond that which is required for ecclesiastical purposes. Leave detailed investigations to those who have custodial, professional, or legal responsibility in these matters.
- *When necessary, help authorities provide separate living arrangements.* If abuse occurs within the family and separation is needed for the protection of the child, encourage the *offender* to live away from home. Removing the child may cause added suffering to the child and may intensify feelings of guilt.
- *Never minimize the seriousness of the abuse.* Do not try to persuade legal officers to let the Church handle these situations.

If only all children had loving parents, safe homes, and caring friends, what a wonderful world would be theirs. Unfortunately, not all children are so bounteously blessed. Some children witness their fathers savagely beating their mothers, while others are on the receiving end of such abuse. . . . The Church does not condone such heinous and vile conduct.

THOMAS S. MONSON, IN
CONFERENCE REPORT, OCT.
1991, PP. 94–95; OR *ENSIGN*,
NOV. 1991, P. 69

Maintaining Confidentiality

Church leaders should keep in mind that confessions and interviews should be held in strict confidence. This applies to Church disciplinary proceedings as well (see *General Handbook of Instructions*, p. 10-2). Where applicable, members should be encouraged to comply with child abuse reporting laws.

Using the HELP LINE

Bishops and counselors in stake presidencies should consult with their stake presidents about incidents of child abuse. If you become aware of any child abuse involving Church members in the United States or Canada, or if you believe that a child may have been abused or is at risk of being abused, call the HELP LINE (1-800-453-3860, extension 1911). This will allow leaders to consult with social services, legal, and other specialists who can assist in answering questions and in formulating steps that should be taken. Information about local reporting requirements will also be provided.

Adults Abused as Children

In helping adults who were abused as children, you should:

- Listen to their concerns.
- Be an example of kindness, love, patience, and long-suffering.
- Focus on solutions to current problems.
- When appropriate, enlist the aid of a professional therapist whose approach is consistent with gospel teachings and standards.
- Avoid excessive probing into details of the offense.

A person who has been abused is often confused about what actually occurred, why it happened, and who was responsible. To be counseled to forgive and forget before resolving this confusion is not helpful. Forgiveness is a process that occurs as the person gains understanding and strives to live in harmony with gospel principles.

Adult Memories of Childhood Abuse

Some members who believe they were abused as children, including those reporting repeated and severe abuse, may not recall or tell others of the alleged mistreatment until they are adults. As they try to reconstruct childhood memories, they often have difficulty determining what actually happened. Avoid making judgments about the accuracy of reported events. Memory is complex and may be unreliable. Be respectful, kind, and patient. What actually occurred may never be

No man can please his Heavenly Father who fails to respect the daughters of God. No man can please his Heavenly Father who fails to magnify his wife and companion, and nurture and build and strengthen and share with her. . . . Wife abuse is totally inconsistent with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

GORDON B. HINCKLEY, IN
CONFERENCE REPORT, APR.
1985, PP. 65–66; OR *ENSIGN*,
MAY 1985, P. 49

determined. If a member accuses someone of abuse, refer to section 10, “Church Discipline,” in the *General Handbook of Instructions*.

Spouse Abuse

The scriptures declare, “Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it” (Ephesians 5:25; see also D&C 121:34–36, 41–46). The prophets have taught that husbands and wives are to love one another and treat each other with respect and kindness.

Spouse abuse may be spiritual, emotional, physical, or sexual. The woman is usually the injured party.

Spiritual abuse includes exercising unrighteous control, dominion, or compulsion.

Emotional abuse includes name calling, demeaning statements, threats, isolation, intimidation, or manipulation.

Physical abuse includes coercion, withholding resources, and physical violence such as pushing, choking, scratching, pinching, restraining, or hitting.

Sexual abuse may be either emotional or physical and includes sexual harassment, inflicting pain during sexual intimacy, and the use of force or intimidation to make a spouse perform a sexual act.

Patterns of Spouse Abuse

Spouse abuse tends to become more severe over time and usually requires some form of intervention or professional treatment to over-

come the behavior. It generally includes three elements:

Tension, which may build immediately or over time. The spouse is often aware of the increasing tension and tries to please, pacify, or humor the offender.

Abuse, which may be triggered by even minor incidents. Apologizing or trying to reason with the offender seldom curbs the violence.

Remorse expressed by the offender following the abuse. The offender may apologize and vow to change or may try to soften the effects of abuse by giving gifts, making exaggerated efforts to pacify the injured spouse, or acting as though no mistreatment occurred.

Helping the Abused Spouse

In helping spouses who have been abused, you should:

- Conduct private interviews with the injured spouse.
- Help the spouse understand that the offender is responsible for his or her own behavior.
- Do not encourage the spouse to tolerate or endure the abusive acts.
- Encourage the spouse to seek assistance from family members and friends.
- Encourage the spouse to consider use of women’s shelters, protective orders, and legal and police assistance if necessary.
- Contact the HELP LINE for additional guidance about responding to spouse abuse (see p. 3).

Even when parents become elderly, we ought to honor them by allowing them freedom of choice and the opportunity for independence as long as possible. . . . When the elderly become unable to care for themselves, even with supplemental aid, care can be provided in the home of a family member when possible. Church and community resources may also be needed in this situation.

EZRA TAFT BENSON, IN
CONFERENCE REPORT, OCT.
1989, PP. 6–7; OR *ENSIGN*,
NOV. 1989, PP. 6–7

Other Forms of Abuse

Abuse of the Elderly

While abuse of the elderly does not receive much public attention, it is a serious problem when it occurs. The Lord has commanded, “Honour thy father and thy mother” (Exodus 20:12). Children have a responsibility to care for their parents, providing for their needs physically and emotionally. Children should help their parents to remain self-reliant and able to make their own decisions as long as the parents can reasonably do so.

Mistreatment of the elderly may include:

- Name calling, demeaning statements, and threats.
- Slapping, shoving, shaking, confinement, and other acts of physical violence.
- Isolation, neglect, or abandonment.
- Misuse of finances or property.
- Withholding medication or medical care.
- Denying freedom of choice to those who are able to choose.

Elderly parents may not report abuse because they do not want to hurt their children or because they fear losing a place to live. The suggestions given for helping abused children or spouses can also apply to helping the elderly. Abuse of the elderly tends to become progressively worse with time.

Abuse of Those with Disabilities

During his ministry the Lord showed special concern and compassion for the disabled. He said, “Have ye any that are lame, or blind, or halt, or maimed, or leproous, or that are withered, or that are deaf, or that are afflicted in any manner? Bring them hither . . . , for I have compassion upon you” (3 Nephi 17:7). Those with physical, emotional, or mental disabilities are particularly vulnerable to abuse. Whatever their ages, they may be unable to protect themselves. Abuse may be verbal, physical, or sexual. It may include neglect of basic needs. The suggestions for helping abused children or spouses can also apply to helping those with disabilities.

Working with Offenders

When abuse becomes known, some offenders feel remorse, a desire to confess their sins, and a willingness to begin the repentance process. Some deny wrongdoing or seek to place blame on others. Offenders usually persist in abusive behavior until they confess their sins and accept both spiritual and professional help. Most repeat offenders have difficulty changing. This is so even though they may express deep remorse and resolve never to repeat the behavior. They rarely change until they experience the full consequences of their immoral and illegal actions.

We find solace in Christ through the agency of the Comforter, and Christ extends this invitation to us: "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28). . . . As we do this, healing takes place.

JAMES E. FAUST, IN
CONFERENCE REPORT, APR.
1992, P. 8; OR *ENSIGN*,
MAY 1992, P. 8

Priesthood leaders should exercise great care and discernment in calling members to positions that affect the welfare of youth. A priesthood leader should not call a member to a position involving children or youth if the priesthood leader believes that the member has sexually abused a child. If there are questions, leaders should call the HELP LINE (see p. 3). All members called to serve in Scouting positions must register with the Boy Scouts of America or Scouts Canada immediately following their call.

The Lord has said, "By this ye may know if a man repenteth of his sins—behold, he will confess them and forsake them" (D&C 58:43; see also 1 John 1:9; Mosiah 26:29). Repentance is possible only when offenders have fully confessed their sins to the bishop and acknowledged their wrongdoing to those whom they have offended. As appropriate, the stake president may become involved in the repentance process. The offender needs to submit to appropriate Church disciplinary measures and requirements of the law, and live in compliance with gospel teachings and standards. Bishops and stake presidents should refer to the *General Handbook of Instructions* for guidelines regarding Church discipline.

Offenders begin the repentance process as they take responsibility for the consequences of their actions by:

- Living the commandments and accepting spiritual direction from priesthood leaders.
- Obtaining professional help.
- Complying with all legal requirements, such as reporting abuse to appropriate legal authorities.
- Obeying protective orders and, as necessary, separating themselves from those whom they have offended.
- Assisting with payment for costs incurred as a result of the abuse.

Priesthood leaders may require reporting of the abusive behavior as a step in the repentance process.

Additional Helps

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has established LDS Social Services to provide professional assistance to Church members and others. Ecclesiastical leaders can contact LDS Social Services to identify a professional therapist whose approach is in harmony with gospel principles, or call the HELP LINE (1-800-453-3860, extension 1911).

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